

LAST  
THE FINAL PAPER  
or, REALISM, ARTIFICE AND SCIENCE  
or, ROSSELLINI AND EISENSTEIN: THE DIALECTIC OF SCIENCE

or, THE RISE TO THE BLAISING AGE OF SOCRATES OF HIPPO

or, HOW I LEARNED TO STOP WORRYING AND LOVE SAM FULLER, JEAN-LUC GODARD AND  
ROBERTO ROSSELLINI IN 4 SHORT YEARS OF COLLEGE

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"Realism" has always been the refuge of the conservative in the arts, together with a preference for propaganda of a comforting rather than disturbing kind. <sup>1</sup>

\*2-Sergei Eisenstein

Bazin developed a bi-polar view of the cinema. On the one hand was Realism ("The good, the true, the just", as Godard was later to say of the work of Rossellini); on the other hand was expressionism, the deforming intervention of human agency.<sup>2</sup>

--Peter Wollen

Since the days of Lumiere and Melies the texts of the cinema have enacted a dichotomy between the realistic and the fantastic or artificial, or so theorists dating at least as far back as Eisenstein would have us believe. The customary critical vision is that Melies grew up and became Eisenstein, Sternberg and Dr. Caligari while Lumiere matured into Flaherty, Murnau, Welles and Rossellini. Lost in the haze of these generalizations is the scientist, Thomas Edison. True, Edison led directly to Edwin S. Porter, THE GREAT TRAIN ROBBERY and the whole of American narrative film, but in a more spiritual sense Edison developed into both Rossellini and Eisenstein. Science and technology (which serve industry) inform the historical "realism" of Rossellini's ~~of his television~~ films (perhaps authenticity would be a better word) ~~as Eisenstein's films~~ as well as Eisenstein's films of the twenties and much of his critical writing. The "bi-polar view" so obvious in Bazin is severely complicated in the late films of Rossellini; those films may contain the spirit of ROME OPEN CITY (as some critics and Rossellini himself have suggested), but they evince little similarity in narrative construction or stylistic concerns. Though Rossellini's later films do not literally resemble Eisenstein's filmed experiments in montage (I use this word in Eisenstein's sense) they operate under many of the codes of science which Eisenstein was working with. In the present paper I shall articulate the customary opposition between Rossellini and Eisenstein and then elucidate what I posit to be some most important points of convergence.

Doubtlessly the most important and influential critic to attend a screening of ROME OPEN CITY (1945) is Andre Bazin. He views the development of cinema to the time of Rossellini as a progression of realism beginning with Feuillade (Kracauer might say Lumiere), ranging through the silent films of Von Stroheim, Murnau and Flaherty and the thirties product of Renoir and culminating, in the forties, in two distinct currents: Rossellini and Welles (later Wyler). In the course of his adamant praise of the realistic in film he condemned that which he thought artificial; ready targets for this denouncement were Russian theorists (and filmmakers) such as Eisenstein and Kuleshov who advocated, in print, the fragmentation of reality in order to create art. Indeed, there is little to bind OCTOBER (1927) with PAISAN (1946) on a narrative or stylistic level.

Rossellini and, almost secondarily, Italian Neorealism commanded much of Bazin's interest and critical talents. He denies the importance of many of the byproducts of Neorealism, i.e., real settings and non-professional actors, and places his faith in the use of deep focus photography and loosely connected dieges<sup>e</sup>is. His favorite metaphor <sup>for</sup> ~~for~~ the style of films such as ROME OPEN CITY and PAISAN is a narrative ford across a river of natural formlessness (included in both "An Aesthetic of Reality" and "In Defense of Rossellini"):

The technique of Rossellini undoubtedly maintains an intelligible succession of events, but these do not mesh like a chain with the sprockets of a wheel. The mind has to leap from one event to the other as one leaps from stone to stone in crossing a river. It may happen that one's foot hesitates between two rocks, or that one misses one's footing and slips. The mind does likewise.<sup>3</sup>

The other mainstay of Bazin's writing on realism in the cinema is deep focus photography. He expounded at length in "The Evolution of the Language of Cinema":

(1) That depth of focus brings the spectator into a relation with the image closer to that which he enjoys with reality. Therefore it is correct to say that, independently of the contents of the image, its structure is more realistic;  
(2) That it implies, consequently, both a more active mental attitude on the part of the spectator and a more positive contribution on his part to the action in progress. While analytical montage only calls for him to follow his guide, to let his attention follow along smoothly with that of the director who will choose what he should see, here he is called upon to exercise at least a ~~minimum~~<sup>minimum</sup> of personal choice. It is from his attention and his will that the meaning of the image in part derives.

(3) From the two preceding propositions, which belong to the realms of psychology, there follows a third which may be described as metaphysical. In analyzing reality, montage presupposes of its very nature the unity of meaning of the dramatic event. Some other form of analysis is undoubtedly possible, but then it would be another film. In short, montage by its very nature rules out ambiguity of expression.<sup>4</sup>

Quite obviously, Eisenstein's films do not possess an ambiguity of expression. STRIKE (1924) and OCTOBER (1927) are not gentle fords for the moviegoer to cross at his or her leisure, but tightly constructed, steel-girdered bridges high above any formlessness of nature. The contrasts are abrupt and immediately apparent: Rossellini uses deep focus, Renoir uses fluid camera movements to create simple tales while Eisenstein builds static close-ups into complex narrative structures in which the spectator must "follow his guide" or be lost.

It seems evident, therefore, that some films are (neo)realistic while others are not. ~~Unfortunately~~<sup>Unfortunately</sup> the matter is not so simple<sup>y</sup> resolved; Luchino Visconti's LA TERRA TREMA is but one example of a film utilizing Bazinian deep focus and a proletarian setting and story to a most operatic and unrealistic end. Further, critics of today, their vision cleared of the prejudices resulting from World War II, pick out the strains of typecasting and melodrama in Italian Neorealism; there is precious little "neo" or "realism" in Neorealism. It would appear that Bazin excludes more than he

intends when he states: "I will only deny the qualification neorealism to the director who, to persuade me, puts asunder what reality has joined together."<sup>5</sup> What text could possibly fulfill this requirement totally? *ROME OPEN CITY* chooses portions of Anna Magnani's performance and *PAISAN* fragments the events of post-War Italy in a fashion different, but no more realistic than Eisenstein's fracturing of reality in *POTEMKIN* (1925). Realism can be created through artifice, through reality put asunder. As Siegfried Kracauer notes:

Strangely enough, it is entirely possible that a staged real life event evokes a stronger illusion of reality on the screen than would the original event if it had been captured directly by the camera. The late Erno Metzner who devised the setting for the studio-made disaster in Pabst's *KAMERADSCHAFT* -- an episode with the ring of stark authenticity -- insisted that candid shots of a real mining disaster would hardly have produced the same convincing effect.<sup>6</sup>

In the end it is but a culturally determined code of realism which determines what we consider realistic or artificial. As alluded to above, contemporary critics of *ROME OPEN CITY* and *PAISAN* were blinded by their culture to the melodrama and stereotype of Rossellini's films. Movies on the Italian resistance forces and the common people's day-to-day struggles, made by Italians, appeared more authentic than Hollywood produced narratives such as *THE STORY OF G.I. JOE* (1945) or *ANCHORS AWEIGH* (1945). However, /Louis Norman recently wrote in Film Quarterly:

The characters of *OPEN CITY* and, to a lesser degree, of *PAISAN*, are unmistakably stereotypic. We can almost see labels: heroic Resistance leader, sadistic Nazi, disillusioned Officer, courageous Priest, and so on. Perhaps nowhere is the melodramatic quality more apparent than in the musical accompaniment which seeks to intensify our response to the action. Such emotional manipulation now seems excessive.<sup>7</sup>

Apparently the narrative codes governing classic American film were to be



found overdetermining Rossellini's Neorealistic films. Bazin attempted to raise his aesthetic above cultural codes to the level of absolute, but he was thwarted by the incestuous relationship of <sup>coded</sup>artifice and uncoded reality in the cinema. Bazin's ~~ford~~ is just a different version of Eisenstein's finely crafted bridge, both carrying the spectator from one bank to another.

Now that we have synthesized the antithetical into an uneasy union, we must ~~separate~~ them once again. The Neorealist films of Rossellini ~~are~~ <sup>all</sup> differentiated from the silent films of Eisenstein in the organization of their signifying codes: framing, camera angle, static v. moving camera, shot duration (cf. Raymond Bellour). While Eisenstein gravitates toward close-ups, strange (in comparison to established cultural norms) camera angles, static camera and short shots, Rossellini works more with medium long shots, inexpressive camera angles, an occasionally fluid camera (though Renoir would serve as a better example of "realistic" camera movement) and longer takes. Erno Metzner created signifiers for KAMERADSCHAF that culture has defined as realistic; film of the actual event would not have signified that same realism, ~~it lacks the culturally determined signifiers necessary for that signification.~~ <sup>discusses</sup> William S. Pechter ~~points out that~~ Bazin's claim of the artless, ostensibly uncoded, democracy of deep focus:

It is not that Renoir lets you look where you will but rather that he gives you more to look at; when one says that he doesn't direct one's eye, one actually means that he directs it with that art which conceals art and with a consummate subtlety. Yet no less than in the films of Eisenstein it is the artist's vision that our eye is finally brought to see.<sup>8</sup>

I would here emphasize that these signifiers do not signify "reality", but indeed they can only signify "realism"; realism is a particular form of signification organized by a very particular code, while in contrast

reality is an unorganized, undetermined formlessness which must be "fragmented" and synthesized in order to produce a text. Early Rossellini adheres to the code of realism, Eisenstein does not. (Robin Wood compares Rossellini's PAISAN with Eisenstein's POTEMKIN in his article in Film Comment on Rossellini.<sup>8</sup> His remarks are informative, though somewhat contradictory and tangential to the case I have here made for a cultural code of realism.) Rossellini's Ingrid Bergman films strayed from the code of realism that the Neorealist films had enacted; or perhaps it might be more accurate to say that they expanded that code. Rossellini was now searching for the realism, the authenticity, within one woman. Wood explains this reality in the following terms:

The "reality" of a person (actress or character) is not something there to be photographed. For one thing, the "reality" exists only (so far as art is concerned) as seen by the artist. For another, it exists not in a vacuum but in terms of relatedness — the relatedness of individual to environment, and beyond that to fundamental and eternal realities, in particular the fact of death.<sup>9</sup>

Whereas the realism of the Neorealist films centered on realistic societal issues of the day, the Bergman films investigate the realistic problems of interpersonal relationships, particularized by the real life friction suffered by Bergman and Rossellini. To return to Wood:

As the true heir (as well as one of the founders) of neorealism, he is committed to showing only the surfaces of physical reality, without distortion or intervention in the form of special effects, surrealist images, dramatic compositions, or symbolic lighting (though the last two are not unknown in his work); yet no director is more single-mindedly concerned with the invisible, the spiritual.<sup>10</sup>

As well as articulating his view of the code of realism, Wood here directs us to the new, but still realistic concerns of Rossellini: "the invisible, the spiritual." The realities of Bergman's spiritual convolutions are

the all too painful subjects for Rossellini's second period.

As Rossellini moves to the <sup>the</sup>spiritual or personal realism we see in STROMBOLI, PAURA, EUROPE 51 and VOYAGE TO ITALY, he approaches the transparent codes of classic American cinema. We can note this most strikingly on the level of narrative codes: Bergman is united with Saund<sup>e</sup>s at the end of VOYAGE IN ITALY in compliance with the code of the couple and she is made to acknowledge the power of her husband in PAURA and her husband and God in STROMBOLI, as the classic American woman character is also subjugated. The organization of the signifiers reinforces these narrative codes; there is a less striking use of deep focus, the shots are shorter, the lighting is more uniform, the sets are skillfully crafted, etc. Both the signifiers and the signified diegesis depart from the code of realism enunciated in the earlier films. To find realism in the Bergman films we must modify our conception of it to include internal, spiritual realities.

Robin Wood's tenuous suggestion that PAURA may be more closely <sup>auto-</sup> ~~author~~ biographical than is comfortable to admit posits an intriguing link with the historical films which shall lead us back to Eisenstein. Wood writes:

It may not be far-fetched to see the subject of FEAR [PAURA] -- a scientist-husband arranging a supposedly beneficent experiment on his unfaithful wife, subjecting her to blackmail to make her confess to him and in fact driving her to the brink of suicide -- is linked consciously or unconsciously with Rossellini's "experiments" with Bergman in the films. The husband sets up a semi-controlled mise-en-scene in which the wife's reactions can be studied.<sup>11</sup>

Throughout Rossellini's later, historical films science, in a loose sense, occupies a privileged position. This is not to say the historical films present scientists at work experimenting with the <sup>lives</sup> ~~life~~ of their spouses as we find in PAURA, but that an aspiration toward science in form and content suffuses the historical films and brings them into unlikely contact <sup>with</sup> ~~with~~



the scientific aspirations of Sergei Eisenstein. Within Rossellini's scientific proclivities is the desire to rise above cultural codes, to present historical "facts" untarnished by the culture of the epoch of their production or origination. Eisenstein also wishes to exclude himself from cultural codes in his constant drive toward the eternal in art. He quests the eternal by looking inside the medium and attempting to discern the natural properties of film, traits which exist outside the scope of culture.

The term scientific calls to mind many different connotations; I use it here to denote that which is precisely formulated and logically conceived. Consequently we may find science in music, painting and narrative as well as philosophy, mathematics, geology, astronomy, physics, etc. Additionally, the application of science to industry is what I will refer to as technology. Science and technology are often the subject of Rossellini's historical films and science itself informs Rossellini's stylistics. One can note science in the precisely premeditated technology of fashion in THE RISE TO POWER OF LOUIS XIV (1966), the philosophical ruminations in SOCRATES (1970), the mathematics in BLAISE PASCAL (1971) and the commercialism and, most importantly, perspective in THE AGE OF COSIMO D'MEDICI (1972). Louis XIV, Socrates, Blaise Pascal, Cosimo D'Medici and Leon Battista Alberti are all men of science in their respective fields. ~~AUGUSTINE~~ <sup>AUGUSTINE</sup> OF HIPPO (1972) presents a more problematic character; Augustine went through many years as a heretic before coming to the church. However, once in the church he offers a fragile order to a world gone chaotic with the fall of Rome. He logically (scientifically) constructs his "cities" and combats superstition as well as heretics (He calms one superstitious subject by telling him the tale of the soldier who was frightened by rats gnawing at his shoes, fearing that this was a bad omen. Augustine remarked that he would be more concerned if the

shoes were gnawing the rats.)

Rossellini has chosen to present these topics in a manner which some have termed Brechtian, but which may also be thought of as scientific. This scientific and consequently anti-lyrical attitude of Rossellini's arose from his estrangement with the cinema following the Bergman films (i.e., 1957 - 1959). Ten year/ later he reflected on that time with some/detachment:

I went through a period thinking film was completely useless. Useless because (and it needs to be said) the things that films are made about are always the same things; the repetition is endless. Film never has been very useful, in any sense of the word. It also needs to be said, though, that a certain amount of "entertainment" could come from the exploration of subjects... the in-depth study of things that people don't even suspect yet, that don't belong to the horizons of everyday culture; this too is a form of entertainment it seems to me.<sup>12</sup>

Rossellini undercuts the dynamics of the cinema by careful, precise and scientific use of his Pancinor zoom lens. With a technique which would have pleased Alberti, Rossellini constructs long, single take sequences in which the camera follows an exact pattern actually manipulated by Rossellini (by <sup>virtue</sup> ~~virtue~~ of the remote control of the Pancinor lens); Rossellini is the architect of the cinema as Alberti is the architect of painting.

In contradistinction, Eisenstein's science developed from a passionate love for the cinema and its power. Eisenstein and his fellow Russian film theorist Kuleshov did not film men of thought and science as Rossellini did, but they found science in the technological governances of the working class to be found in industry. Steven Kovacs makes the following observations of early filmmakers:

Kuleshov contrasts a railroad bridge with a ramshackle cabin in the countryside to prove that shots of a modern technological content are inherently more cinematic than those of traditionally lyric subject matter. Other early advocates of the cinema shared this point of view, but they argued that movies were best at showing technology because film itself was one of the products of advanced technology. Films about machines were testimonials to the new technological age both in form and content.<sup>13</sup>

Kuleshov attempted to make his actors into machines; through technology he hoped to reach the essential nature of a technological art. Even at the time Kuleshov was working (the mid-1920s) the cinematic codes had evolved to a constricting sophistication; he aspired to transcend those codes through science.

Compared to Kuleshov or abstract mechanical films such as Fernand Leger's *BALLET MECANIQUE* (1924) Eisenstein is much less schematic in his application of science. His science is a conflict between two forms of logic:

The logic of organic form versus the logic of rational form yields, in collision, the dialectic of the art form. The intersection of the two produces and determines Dynamism.<sup>14</sup>

For example, when one unites the organic logic of a photograph of a baby carriage running down the Odessa steps with the rational logic of montage (as conceived by Eisenstein), "Dynamism" is produced.

Montage is the quintessential element of Eisenstein's science: "I [Eisenstein] consider (...) such a concept [long takes] to be utterly unfilmic."<sup>15</sup> One wonders how he might react to the long takes of Rossellini's historical films. Surely Eisenstein would have applauded Rossellini's movement toward scientific dissociation. As Peter Wollen comments:

...it is hard not to see much of Eisenstein's later writing as an attempt to shore up, scientifically and intellectually, an art increasingly preoccupied with emotional saturation, ecstasy, the synchronisation of the senses, myth and primitive thought.<sup>16</sup>

Similarly, it is difficult not to think of Eisenstein when Rossellini speaks of the Industrial Revolution thus:

Man had been a slave: energy had always been supplied by men, with some help from the animals, and then from windmills and watermills: But this was a great advance. Now energy, steam energy and electrical energy, were

invented. It was a fantastic advance, introducing a completely new dimension into men's lives, and transforming their prospects. Prometheus's discovery of fire, which had begun it all has been sung by thousands of poets, good and bad, and depicted by thousands of painters and sculptors. But who has tried to describe anything of what has happened this time?<sup>17</sup>

One reply would be Sergei Eisenstein. Eisenstein and Rossellini espouse an enthusiasm for technology that is not shared by their Marxist brethren. Eisenstein finds the power of the workers in their repetitious, machine-like movements; Rossellini sees mostly "Science and technology in the highest sense, the sense of knowledge which is human in its very fibre."<sup>18</sup> Eisenstein finds this technology within the medium of film while Rossellini feels impelled to apply his scientific approach to the conventional methods of film.<sup>19</sup> Each of these men hopes to escape cultural contamination by seeking refuge in science.

# FOOTNOTES

- <sup>1</sup> Eisenstein, Sergei, Film Form (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, Inc., 1949), p. 56.
- <sup>2</sup> Wollen, Peter, Signs and Meaning in the Cinema (Bloomington & London: Indiana Univ. Press, 1972), p. 126.
- <sup>3</sup> Bazin, Andre, What is Cinema? Vol. II (Berkeley: Univ. of Calif. Press, 1974), p. 35.
- <sup>4</sup> Bazin, Andre, What is Cinema? Vol. I (Berkeley: Univ. of Calif. Press, 1974), p. 35 - 36.
- <sup>5</sup> Op. cit., Bazin, What is Cinema Vol. II, p. 100.
- <sup>6</sup> Kracauer, Siegfried, Theory of Film (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1960), p. 35.
- <sup>7</sup> Norman, Louis, "Rossellini's Case Histories for Moral Education", Film Quarterly, Summer 1974, vol. XXVII, #4, p. 11.
- <sup>8</sup> Pechter, William S., Twenty-Four Times a Second (New York: Harper and Row Publishers, 1971), p. 202.
- <sup>9</sup> Wood, Robin, "Roberto Rossellini's Films with Ingrid Berman", Film Comment, July-August 1974, Vol. 10, #4, p. 10.
- <sup>10</sup> Ibid., p. 10.
- <sup>11</sup> Ibid., p. 10.
- <sup>12</sup> Degener, Dave, ed. "Sighting Rossellini", Pacific Film Archives.
- <sup>13</sup> Kovacs, Steven, "Kuleshov's Aesthetics", Film Quarterly, Spring 1976, vol. XXIX, #3, p. 35.
- <sup>14</sup> Op. cit., Eisenstein, p. 46.
- <sup>15</sup> Op. cit., Eisenstein, p. 59.
- <sup>16</sup> Op. cit., Wollen, p. 62.
- <sup>17</sup> Screen issue devoted to Rossellini, Winter 1973-1974, Vol. 14, #4, p. 117.
- <sup>18</sup> Ibid., p. 122.



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